

At-large council race in Montgomery a nail-biter; Berliner leads opponent

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In a race that remained potentially volatile, six at-large county council candidates in Montgomery County were clustered within a few percentage points of one another early Wednesday, raising the prospect that council member Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large) or another incumbent could be nudged from office.

"We're not conceding," said Trachtenberg campaign manager Woody Brosnan. "We're going to wait to see all the results, including the absentee ballots." Those ballots are to be counted in a week.

Trachtenberg has made political enemies among Montgomery's powerful public employee unions, who were thrilled at the prospect of her losing one of the Democratic slots.

"I'm hoping that it holds true that Duchy finishes out of the top four," said John Sparks, head of the county firefighters union. The firefighters had endorsed Trachtenberg four years ago, but relations soured after she became a vocal opponent of costly compensation packages she believes are unsustainable.

"She sought all the endorsements of the unions and she said she would support working families, and support issues of interest to the unions, and when she got elected she did just the opposite," Sparks said.

Challenger Hans Riemer, a former youth organizer for Rock the Vote who worked on President Obama's campaign, was in the top four with most of the votes counted.

"It's not over," Riemer said, as supporters, including council member Valerie Ervin, screamed in excitement at a Silver Spring restaurant. "I'm feeling fantastic," Riemer added. "We're looking good to hold on in the top four."

Leading the pack of six candidates was longtime Takoma Park City Council member and former fifth-grade teacher Marc Elrich. County Council President Nancy Floreen and George L. Leventhal, the energetic former legislative director for Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D), were also in the top four as votes were still being counted.

Leventhal wasn't declaring victory exactly, but, "It certainly feels like I'm going back to the county council for another four years," he said at Gordon Biersch restaurant in Rockville late Tuesday.

Trachtenberg and Becky Wagner, who runs the nonprofit group Interfaith Works, were neck and neck.

Energy lawyer Roger Berliner was far outpacing Ilaya Hopkins in a Montgomery council primary that offered an early test case in the electoral effectiveness of playing the Pepco card.

After long outages following summer storms, Pepco's unreliability has angered and unified many Montgomery residents. Just how that ire might be harnessed, and who might benefit, has been a live political question in Maryland.

With most of the votes counted on a primary day that saw a trickle of voters, Berliner, the incumbent in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase council district, seemed to be getting an early answer to that question as he built what appeared to be an insurmountable lead over Hopkins.

Hopkins had sent a series of negative mailers in recent days, including one showing a flashlight and darkened refrigerator that said: "The Power is Out. Where's Roger Berliner?"

"I think Democrats in District 1 expressed support for the work I've done," Berliner said. "That's what elections are about."

Her chances "are looking very slim," Hopkins said.

In District 2, which covers a broad swath of northern and western Montgomery, longtime Montgomery planner Royce Hanson congratulated Democratic Maryland Del. Craig Rice on his apparent victory. Although votes were still being counted, results demonstrated how political pragmatism and establishment connections can blunt a challenge from an opponent with Hanson's sometimes prickly brand of expansive thinking.

"It feels tremendous," Rice said. "I'm just happy the voters have decided to trust me to try to bring the council together."

"We simply weren't as well organized on the ground," Hanson said.

The Berliner-Hopkins council primary in District 1 -- which stretches from Potomac and White Flint to Chevy Chase and Friendship Village on the D.C. border -- had turned nasty over the past few days, as Hopkins sent out negative mailers.

The District 1 race also offered sharp elbows on Pepco.

"His mailers -- paid for with almost \$1,000 from Pepco -- might make you think he understands your frustration," one Hopkins mailer read, adding references to the high costs of spoiled food and lost work days during the recent outages. "Had enough?"

Berliner said he has aggressively challenged Pepco, drafting legislation for tighter oversight and requesting a reliability investigation, which was subsequently launched. Acknowledging the contributions, he said: "My response is, judge me by what I've done. . . I don't think I've pulled my punches on Pepco."

Many of the candidates made their way to Leisure World in Silver Spring, widely considered a trove for Democrats.

"This is the center of the universe," Floreen said.

Although candidates and campaign volunteers lined the long sidewalk from the packed parking lot to the clubhouse doors, election officials and candidates said the turnout, like that countywide, was relatively light.

Candidates target the retirement community during the weeks and months prior to election day as well -- attempting to win them over with mailings, phone calls and campaign events.

"They've been exposed to an unending wave of campaign events," Floreen said.

It might have been too much. Several Leisure World residents complained about the onslaught as they approached the polls, and avoided the long sidewalk gantlet of politicians and campaign volunteers.

"I wish they didn't call so many times and spend all that money on literature," said Dora Pugliese, a Leisure World resident. "This year they were just terrible."

Many council races tended to be remarkably amicable over the months of campaigning.

The choose-four format of the at-large races was partly responsible. Some candidates said attacks wouldn't pay off -- better, instead, to avoid offending their opponents' voters and try to lure their support as well.

The incumbents largely stuck together. Challengers offered a series of critiques, mainly focused on the county's fiscal stewardship in a year of tough budget cuts. They argued that the incumbents had taxed too much, spent irresponsibly and missed crucial cues about the national downturn, which sapped county revenue.

Although the incumbents had sparred over spending priorities during budget sessions in the spring, they essentially acted as one during the campaign, saying they had proved through difficult votes that they have a thorough understanding of the county's finances and the experience to oversee them.

Despite their criticisms of the county's fiscal management, Wagner and Jane de Winter, a former president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, each had long histories of appealing to the county for money for their causes, including social services and public schools. Leventhal in particular had bristled at what he considered a blaring inconsistency, despite being an early Wagner ally. The challengers said that withstanding the barrage of requests is part of a council member's job description.

In the Republican primary for county executive, attorney Douglas E. Rosenfeld, who county elections officials said registered as a Republican in April, was leading ghostwriter Daniel Vovak. The GOP winner will have the unenviable task in strongly Democratic Montgomery of taking on incumbent Isiah Leggett come November.